



WALT WHITMAN  
QUARTERLY REVIEW

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Volume 8 | Number 2 ( 1990)

pps. 102-103

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## Price, Kenneth. Whitman and Tradition [review]

Roger Asselineau

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

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### Recommended Citation

Asselineau, Roger. "Price, Kenneth. Whitman and Tradition [review]." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 8 (Fall 1990), 102-103. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1284>

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## REVIEWS

KENNETH M. PRICE. *Whitman and Tradition: The Poet in His Century*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990. xii + 179 pp.

So much has been written on Whitman that it is now difficult to be innovative. Yet, in this unpretentious little book on what he calls "Whitman and Tradition," Kenneth Price manages to shed some new light on a well-known topic. All students of Whitman know that *Leaves of Grass* was not the work of a semi-illiterate "rough," "drinking and breeding" and never reading. No writer can create *ex nihilo* and Whitman was no exception to the rule. He was not the manual worker shown on the daguerrotype which served as his signature to the 1855 quarto. He was an ambitious and promising young journalist who devoured all the books and magazines that came his way. (The Trent Collection in the Duke University Library contains innumerable clippings from books and magazines collected by the so-called "rough" in the 1840s and 1850s; they are generously annotated and underscored and bear witness to his insatiable intellectual curiosity.) Price examines some of the influences which Whitman thus underwent in the years when he was "simmering, simmering" before Emerson brought him to a boil, to take up the often quoted phrase. (Price, by the way, doubts the authenticity of the phrase, because it was reported by J.T. Trowbridge many years after the event, but the formula is so felicitous that only Whitman himself could have invented it.)

The study of influences has become unfashionable, but Price gives his influence study more breadth by examining "book reviews and other minor writings, the power of publishers and censors, the role of immediate audiences of all kinds" and also gives it more depth by concentrating on the protagonists—Shakespeare, Milton and Tennyson—since in those days Elizabethan and Cromwellian literature was regarded as the past of American literature and Victorian literature as, in a way, its present. This is the tradition Price refers to in his title and he shows how ambiguous was Whitman's attitude toward it, for Whitman could not help admiring the best English poets, whom he considered "real first class poets." But he felt morally obliged to denounce and reject them as representatives and unwitting apologists of an aristocratic society which he often chose to call "feudal," the better to damn it. On this particular point, Price should perhaps have followed Clifton Joseph Furness's excellent little pamphlet on *Walt Whitman's Estimate of Shakespeare* (1932), in which Furness—with a great sense of Whitman's complexities—described the swing of the poet's mental pendulum. Indeed, at first, before 1855, Whitman uncritically worshipped Shakespeare, especially the historical plays, which he declaimed and even "spouted" from the tops of Broadway stage-coaches or on the beach at Coney Island, but, later, when Shakespeare became his rival for the first place in world literature, he attacked him for despising the common man and even for "using a hundred words when a dozen would do." It was

only in the serenity of old age that he concluded: "If I had not stood before [Shakespeare's] poems with uncovered head, fully aware of their colossal grandeur and beauty of form and spirit, I could not have written *Leaves of Grass*."

Price's most revisionist work appears in his chapter on "Whitman and Emerson Reconsidered." If we are to believe him, Emerson's influence has been much exaggerated. He reads the 1856 open letter to Emerson in a unique way and discovers in it undertones unfavorable to Whitman's theoretical "master," especially when Whitman generalizes and attacks *all* American poets as pedants and eunuchs, as if he had forgotten that Emerson was one of them. True, Emerson denied sex and deserved this criticism, but his transcendentalism nonetheless was a paramount and determining influence on *Leaves of Grass*, even if it was reinforced by the influence of the English Romantic poets—whom Whitman criticized upon other grounds. Besides, their influence was indirect rather than direct like that of Emerson, and I think I have proved elsewhere that his knowledge of Wordsworth's poetry in particular was extremely limited.

Price's book also contains interesting pages on Whitman's attitude toward Carlyle (though none on Walter Scott) and toward his American contemporaries—Poe, Longfellow and Bryant. It is too often forgotten that Whitman was an excellent literary critic (even though he did not have the advantage of reading Barthes and Derrida). He had an acute mind and a gift for happy phrases, and his conversations with Horace Traubel are full of critical gems.

After four chapters on the influences undergone by Whitman, Price's book suddenly turns unexpectedly in the last two chapters to an examination of the influence which Whitman—having created a new tradition—exerted on others: on the one hand, on three novelists (Hamlin Garland, Kate Chopin, and E.M. Forster), and, on the other hand, on some Harvard poets (George Santayana, George Cabot Lodge, and William Vaughn Moody, plus Van Wyck Brooks at the beginning of his career). This is an excellent idea. It is true that Whitman's bold treatment of sex encouraged writers to broaden the scope of the novel and treat sexual and marital relations more candidly, though other factors may have come into play. As to the Harvard poets, they did provide a transition to modernist poetry after the two decades of the "big blank" from 1892 to 1912, and they did so by adopting Whitman as "a rallying point and a justification for rejecting what was stale" in nineteenth-century poetry.

This small book, then, has rich and varied contents, and it reads well—a trait not so common these days.

University of Paris-Sorbonne

ROGER ASSELINEAU

DAVID KUEBRICH. *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman's New American Religion*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989. xi + 240 pp.

In "Starting from Paumanok," the "program poem" of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote, "I too, following many and follow'd by many, inaugurate a religion," and went on to devote no less than thirteen stanzas to this topic which was of such crucial importance to him. "The real and permanent grandeur of these States," he claimed, "must be their religion." Indeed,